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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationships between English as a world language, native speakers and their governments, and educational practices to illustrate the risks of power by language and the risks of language. A brief political history of the English language is followed by predictions on the use of English in the 1990s. It is suggested that once a people become educated, the struggle for a national language becomes irresistible and literacy in local languages increases. Throughout history, questions of power and money inevitably lead to the need for a common language for negotiation and discussion. It is concluded that English plays a major role in the movement throughout the world towards greater communication across cultures and that there are risks as well as advantages to this role for native-English speaking countries. (Contains 14 references.) (NAV)

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING, EDUCATION AND POWER

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING, EDUCATION AND POWER

Christopher Brumfit

This paper aims to explore the relationships between English as a world language, native speakers and their governments, and education.

Language and Political Power

English is a world language because its speakers are widely distributed throughout the world. Historically, it shares with French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Dutch, and Italian, the characteristic of having been exported to colonial and imperial territories as part of nineteenth century conquests by European nations. In this sense, English is an imperialist language. But it shares expansion also with languages which have gained numbers by accretion rather than by travel to distant parts of the world. Russian, Chinese and Arabic have expanded their numbers also in the past two hundred years.

Now, however, English has a numerical dominance greater than that of these other languages. In an article in the first issue of the magazine *English Today*, in January 1985, David Crystal cites relevant estimates: about a third of the current world population either lives in countries where English is an official language, or uses English with some competence as a foreign language. It is suggested that 700 million people have a reasonable standard of English, and two billion have some contact with the language in their normal lives. Elsewhere, Crystal points out that the many dialects of Chinese, bound together by the written language, combine to give the only language that exceeds even a third of the figure for English, and the geographical range and the range of cultures embraced by Chinese as a second language is much more restricted than those for English (Crystal, 1987: 287).

If we examine conquest and economic domination in other periods, it becomes clear that (to varying extents) major languages have all had periods of 'imperial' influence. Certainly, of non-western European languages, Russian, Arabic, Swahili, Chinese and Japanese share this characteristic.

English was spread from Britain in two distinct periods of imperial expansion. Furthermore, through its American variety, it has been the medium of economic domination in the twentieth century, while the older colonial empires declined.

Even in a group like the OECD, which excludes colonised countries, six of its twenty-four member states have native-speakers of English as the majority of their populations.

Some would wish to use these undisputed facts to criticise particular groups of people: imperialists, British or Americans, capitalists or Christians or whites. Before I explore the implications of this, though, I would like to offer, for contrast, a brief historico-linguistic sketch of the 1830-40s (based on Hobsbawm, 1962: 168-9). I do this because the time is far enough away, and the languages are remote enough from the experiences of many (though not of course all) language teachers, to enable some issues to be seen from an external perspective.

Commenting on the nineteenth century nationalist movements, Hobsbawm remarks that small elites can operate in foreign languages, but that once enough people are educated, the struggle for a national language becomes irresistible. He writes:

> ... the moment when textbooks or newspapers in the national language are first written ... measures a crucial step in national evolution. The 1830s saw this step taken over large areas of Europe. Thus the first major Czech works in astronomy, chemistry, anthropology, mineralogy and botany were written or completed in this decade; and so, in Rumania, were the first school textbooks substituting Rumanian for the previously current Greek. Hungarian was adopted instead of Latin as the official language of the Hungarian Diet in 1840, though Budapest University, controlled from Vienna, did not abandon Latin lectures until 1844. The Zagreb Gai published his *Croatian Gazette*, (later *Illyrian National Gazette*) from 1835 in the first literary version of what had hitherto been merely a complex of dialects. In countries which had long possessed an official national language, the change cannot be so easily measured, though it is interesting that after 1830 the number of German books published in Germany (as against Latin and French titles) for the first time consistently exceeded 90 per cent ....

The figures for literacy in this period are also instructive: the southern Slavs had less than half a per cent literacy in 1827, the Russians two per cent in 1840. Forty to fifty per cent of the populations of Britain, France and Belgium were illiterate in the 1840s, according to nineteenth century estimates. To a considerable extent, where powerful nationalist forces developed, they coincided with the rise of literacy in local languages.

This evidence is suggestive to those who wish to consider language in relation to power - and also leads us to ask what linguistic results may emerge from current political changes in the same region! But it does indicate some of the problems in ascribing cause and effect. The relationship between language as a symbol of independence or subservience, and actual power relations cannot be a given one-way process. Do we become literate because we wish to use education to fight for liberty, or do we become literate as a result of attaining liberty? Which is cause and which is effect?

English Language Teaching operates in contexts in which language has the same kind of historical significance as that suggested by Hobsbawm. But which side is it on? Greek or Latin were not agents of major political power in the way that English is now. Rightly or wrongly, many countries, or regions, use English as an instrument in the balance of local power. Should we be distinguishing "English" in opposition to "Afrikaans" from "English" in opposition to "Hindi", from "English" in opposition to "Dutch", or "Russian", or even "American"? (I use inverted commas to indicate that "English" is not just a language, but a symbolic cultural possession out of a range of options, as are the other languages.)

Power Relations

I do not know of any examples in history of economic contact in which gross technological imbalance has not resulted in domination once trade has established mutual needs. This is not to say that all relations between peoples have been equally damaging, equally exploitative, or equally beneficial, but it is to claim that the idea that we can avoid mutual dependence of some sort is based either on an ignorance of history, or on a utopian and sentimental vision of human relations that history offers little support for, though it may nonetheless be an important and inspiring ideal. A closely related tradition of philosophical anarchism (see, for example, Woodcock, 1962: 443-51, which discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the resistance to economic and political domination of the movement) has clearly offered a sequence of models (Godwin, Tolstoy, Kropotkin) whose ideals have inspired activists such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and more recent Eastern European resistance. But it is arguable that the success of such movements proceeds more from the bankruptcy of the powerful than from the moral superiority of the weak.

What would be the implications if a linguistic separatist position was possible? We live in a world in which news can travel rapidly to all parts of the globe, and where the implications of new technology can rarely stay hidden for long from the international community. Given that we have the jet plane, and we have television, what difficult questions arise?

Who, for example, decides that penicillin will not be offered to groups of people who know about it but have not themselves invented it? Who negotiates trade relations between primary producers and secondary manufacturers? Who expresses the wishes of those who are filmed for television versus those who make films? Who decides who sells what sophisticated weaponry to whom? The list of questions could be endless.

Decisions on matters such as these, many of which relate closely to survival, are bound up with questions of power and money, and such questions require relatively equal negotiation between the various parties. Such negotiation leads in practice to a desire for a common language. Those who most need to be treated equally, because they start from a position of technical or political weakness, will have strong incentives to learn the languages of those who possess the power and the technology. The latter group has less economic or political incentive to learn the languages of other groups, because they can afford to be relatively independent. So there will be a tendency for speakers of many languages to gravitate towards the languages of the fewer groups with technical and political power. Any right to self-determination, any support for relative democracy or independence for a particular country or a particular group within a country will be contingent upon the ability to negotiate, on as equal terms as possible, with those outsiders who possess and control wealth. Hence our mutual interdependence carries with it a strong tendency towards mass communication. Such a tendency is unlikely to be counteracted until wealth and technology are much more evenly distributed through the countries of the world. It is a matter of personal political faith whether one believes that such redistribution will ever be practically possible. But in the world we live in now, a practical politician may argue, it seems a distant prospect which is scarcely relevant to an analysis of current relationships between language and power. Some members at least, of all language groups, will need access to economically significant major languages.

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The major objections to this position will come from those who see economic and technological considerations as less important than culture and identity. Against the tendencies encouraging international contact must be set the need for individuals to express their own sense of personal and community tradition. On the one hand we have the necessity to preserve our independence by not being exploited and deprived of autonomy by outsiders; on the other we need to identify with what we are preserving. The former requires the languages of external contact, and the latter the language of the local and communal. But, at the very least, the local and communal depends on the tolerance of the externally powerful. And this toleration will often need to be negotiated from a position of local strength, not from an excluded or marginalised position.

The Role of English in the 1990s

If the position outlined above makes sense, it is apparent that a number of powerful languages will inevitably be significant in both national and international relations. Unequal roles for different languages will tend to reflect the unequal power relations of the dominant group using them. Consequently, we cannot avoid the impact of languages of wider communication on local languages. However, there may well be undesirable side-effects that we should try to avoid.

With a model such as this we would be more concerned to mitigate the effects of human relations than to try to abolish such relations altogether. Can we believe that it is possible to avoid some languages dominating others, as long as economic and military power are unequally distributed? Do we believe that we should base our policies on a view that such power will ever be equally distributed in the foreseeable future?

But we also need to be clear what is not being claimed. In a paper first published in 1982 and revised for book-publication, I attempted to define what we should mean by 'English' in the phrase 'English as an international language' (Brumfit 1985: 35-40). I argued that it was difficult to show that English was any better than any other language on purely linguistic grounds, though it was in principle possible that English speakers might be, for historical or cultural reasons, more tolerant of linguistic diversity, and consequently more hospitable to foreigners speaking English, than speakers of some other languages. If this could be shown to be so, this attitude might have an impact on the discourse

structures favoured in English, and lead to a higher degree of flexibility. But this claim lacks empirical support and is hypothetical at present.

The concluding paragraph of the paper, looking at English from a British perspective, reads as follows:

> I pointed out that this leads to a curious paradox. There is a strong movement across the world towards greater communication across cultures, and the English language cannot avoid having a major role to play in this process. But there are risks as well as advantages in this process for the native-speaking English countries. On the one hand they may benefit culturally by having direct access to cultures which are historically and geographically far away from themselves as English is used for secondary purposes by more and more people outside their traditional spheres of influence. And they may achieve economic, even perhaps some political advantages, by sharing a common language. But they risk also creating enmities as well as loyalties. American English may be preferred to British by countries wishing to express their independence from a traditional British connection; countries too closely connected by geography or history to the States have been known to turn towards Britain for a change in model and teaching policy for their English. The same is happening in contacts with Australia and New Zealand. The English-speaking world can be played politically by the non-English-speaking world. Nor need this process be seen solely between the varieties of the English language. There is no necessity for there to be only one. People, and nations, need to be able to hide behind misunderstanding as well as to reveal all to each other. The world, unless it manifests an unprecedented desire for unity in the near future, will require a minimum of two international languages, if only to play them off against each other in self-defence. The paradox for the development of English as an international language is that the more multicultured English becomes the more it will be perceived as a threat and the more it will, in the end, lead people to wish for some alternatives to English. In the meantime, however, users of the English language have been provided with a unique opportunity for cross-cultural contact on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The immediate gains will be not merely political and economic, but linguistic and pedagogic also, as we understand more fully the process of linguistic adaptation to the widely varied needs of people throughout the world. But we do need to consider the paradox very carefully. Perhaps those who care for international communication and world peace should put their efforts into ensuring that there are several viable languages of international communication,

and should resist pressures for a whole world of second-language English users.

It may be objected that the position that has been outlined represents simply the liberal face of exploitation. However, such a claim is very difficult to respond to with clear evidence. There is no doubt that the English language, and English literature as an academic subject, have been perceived to inhibit local developments in both language and culture (see for example the arguments in Ngugi, 1981). The key question is whether this is the inevitable result of pressures between international and local cultures. If it is, we should be looking to mitigate the effects of such pressure. If, however, it could be avoided without undesirable side-effects, we should be looking for means to avoid this.

Criticisms of the role of English have generally come from three related but separable positions. Because English has been the language of government and education in many parts of the world, it has imposed a barrier on access to higher education and thus to individual economic advancement. Ngugi remembers a boy in his class of 1954 who did well in all the other subjects but did not pass in English. He therefore failed the entire School Certificate examination and went on to work in a bus company. Exactly the same situation was reported by a student from Hong Kong coming to Southampton University in September 1988, about friends who had been at school with her. Such unfairnesses are remembered with resentment and guilt by the successful as well as the unsuccessful. However understandable the motivation for language hurdles of this kind (and many not-so-very-old people in Britain will remember Latin being used to similar effect for university entrance), the impact is hard to defend, and constant debate is necessary to ensure that the condition of advancement has not lost whatever justification it may originally have had.

The other two positions are more fundamental. A psychological position has insisted on the need for schooling, especially at the early stages, to be in the mother tongue rather than a second language. The divorce between home and school should be minimised, it is claimed, the bilingual setting representing in its starkest form perennial arguments about the relationship between the language of the home and the language of the school (see Bernstein, 1971, and criticisms in Stubbs, 1976 and Trudgill, 1975).

Underlying these positions is the third one, a much more radical critique of the whole notion of metropolitan culture and its impact on local culture. Here,

observers note the undoubted repression of minority language forms that accompanied the promotion of standard languages during the periods of nineteenth century nationalism. Leith (1983), for example, describes the suppression of Welsh and Scottish Gaelic as compulsory education developed in Britain.

Outside Britain, Gandhi has explored this position most strikingly with reference to English:

> Polak and I had often very heated discussions about the desirability or otherwise of giving the children an English education. It has always been my conviction that Indian parents who train their children to think and talk in English from their infancy betray their children and their country. They deprive them of the spiritual and social heritage of the nation, and render them to that extent unfit for the service of the country. Having these convictions, I made a point of always talking to my children in Gujerati. Polak never liked this. He thought I was spoiling their future. He contended, with all the vigour and love at his command, that, if children were to learn a universal language like English from their infancy, they would easily gain considerable advantage over others in the race of life. He failed to convince me. (Gandhi, 1927: 260-261)

Yet the position is immensely complex. Greene (1972), writing of nineteenth century Ireland, reports:

> ... parents who knew little or no English were not content that their children should learn English at school - which, since the establishment of the national school system was not too difficult to achieve - but went much further, by insisting that they should not teach Irish at all. P J Keenan, a Chief Inspector of National Schools, described this to a Royal Commission in 1868:
>
> > I have myself reported the fact that the anxiety of the people to learn English in parts of Ireland which I have visited is so intense that they have instituted a sort of police system over the children to prevent them uttering a single word of Irish.... I saw in such cases that the intelligence of the children was positively stunted - that it dwindled away....
>
> Three years earlier, W J Menzies had told the Argyll Commissioners:
>
> > It would seem to be a great object for the country, that the means of teaching them English, and of promoting a voluntary

> emigration, should be introduced among them, and it probably would be the cheapest mode in the end, to give them a good English education, which would enable them to procure subsistence and high wages elsewhere, rather than to stay and starve at home. (cited in Durkacz, 1983: 217)

These quotations illustrate the dilemmas of administrators, parents and speakers of languages without economic power. They do not enable us to identify simple solutions in which the language is the servant only of one side or the other. Yet we must also acknowledge that the power of the language may be exploited for good or for evil. Once a language becomes an instrument of cultural diplomacy, it may be subject to the happy and haphazard generosity encouraged by George West's requests for English language materials in Portugal in 1934 (Donaldson, 1984:23-24), or to the explicitly manipulative statements found in many reports through the British Council's history. The Teaching of English Overseas Report of 1956 is typical of this strand when it writes:

> In both the Middle and Far East the United Kingdom has the strongest reasons, military, political and economic, for extending the use of English, and for making available as many teachers and technicians as possible. She ought not to stand by... while Libya is offered a German professor of English for her new university and Egypt exports Egyptian teachers of English and other subjects to Kuwait. (quoted in Donaldson, 1984: 202)

Such sentiments are scarcely surprising, but they are clearly capable of interpretation as part of a pattern of protecting national interests. Indeed, Donaldson's history of the British Council refers several times to the teaching of English as being different from normal aid provision because of its marketability and its closeness to British national identity. A policy of 'my language, right or wrong' will inevitably breed the worst characteristics of imperialism because of its insensitivity to local perceptions of need, both for English and for recognition of other languages.

It is difficult, then, to see any necessary relationship between any language and any ideology. Yet the language of an imperial power will inevitably take on some characteristics of imperialism when used by some of its speakers. However, the range and complexity of the issues for which English is currently needed (a direct result of its success as a world language) make it impossible

to control. There is no evidence of a plan of linguistic imperialism, and even if there were it is difficult to see how a language used by so many people of all ideologies in so many countries could possibly be an instrument of only one set of values. If at the moment the Chinese, the Namibians, the Iranians, and the Iraqis, among so many others, are willing to use English for persuasion of others to their points of view, the language is no longer in the control of its native speakers, and has become post-imperial.

Except that the weapon, the language, that has been expropriated, remains a symbol of culture greater than even the gun. The pen is mightier than the sword because it writes language. And there is a power in language that native speakers cannot afford to forget. Teachers, too, become quasi-native speakers in the power structure. We expect ourselves to, and we welcome the effectiveness of teaching when we have native-speaker-like command of the language. But it is very noticeable how much power lies in our language teaching metaphors: even the innocent word "command" of a language, let alone the "control" and the "freedom", the "drilling", the "monitoring", the "facilitation" and the "empowering"! Who are we, to facilitate and empower?

The linguistic power that the native-speakers have inherited (without choice: they could not refuse their inheritance) is only an example written large of the power that teachers have at the expense of learners. But because it is language that we teach, the symbolic value is greater even than in other subjects, for we are interfering in each individual's identity, even if we do so to expand their range of options, to broaden their repertoire. Doing this gives us certain privileges, for - with intermediate and advanced learners - we have access to people's ideas and thinking in a way denied to teachers of less open-ended subjects. But that gain carries responsibilities of sensitivity and care. The power of the tongue, the power of the pen can breed justified resentment, and our teaching will be more effective, the more sensitive to the love-hate relationship we can be. Behind the pen is a hand. For many of us there may be contexts where Dylan Thomas's poem may be more applicable to our hands and tongues than we like to admit. Certainly, there is an irony in a poem of this kind being written in English by a Welshman. But if it were written in Welsh, I would not be able to use it for you, my anonymous reader, to illustrate the risks of power and the risks of language. And that is the English teacher's paradox, which we must each work out in our own way.

The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;
These five kings did a king to death.

The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder,
The finger joints are cramped with chalk;
A goose's quill has put an end to murder
That put an end to talk.

The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,
And famine grew, and locusts came;
Great is the hand that holds dominion over
Man by a scribbled name.

The five kings count the dead but do not soften
The crusted wound nor stroke the brow;
A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;
Hands have no tears to flow.

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